

# Using VOA News Items

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*By Hu Xiaoqiong*

The Voice of America (VOA) English broadcasts have become the most convenient and accessible resource for Chinese to learn English. The only thing you need is a good quality radio. Then you can receive varied programs on VOA with authentic American pronunciation. The programs cover a wide range of subjects: news, stories, reports on science, agriculture, environment, etc. For beginning students of English, VOA provides “Special English,” which uses a limited vocabulary at a speed of about 90 words per minute. For more advanced students, VOA “Special English” broadcasts can serve as “normal life” listening material at a speed of about 135 words per minute. They are indeed ideal material for teachers to motivate students and improve their students’ listening ability.

I have been using VOA news items for years in my listening course for third-year English majors at my college. I have found this to be an effective way to develop my students’ listening skills and build up their confidence in listening since they do not have sufficient access to native speakers. The following are some activities I have used successfully in my listening lab.

## **Procedure: Teaching Listening Skills**

### ***1. Focusing Attention.***

In news stories, the first sentence is usually the most important one because it contains the most important point of the news story. This is called the “news lead.” The balance of the news story provides supporting facts to give the listener further information. The news lead often tells the listener what has happened, when and where it happened, and who the main characters are. Sometimes, it also tells you why and how it happened as per the following segment:

*President Clinton will host an unpresidential private meeting of Asia-Pacific leaders today on a small island near the northwest U.S. city of Seattle.*

This news lead sentence gives a concise picture of the whole news story and shows where students are supposed to focus their attention.

### ***2. News Vocabulary.***

There are three main kinds of news vocabulary:

i) Common vocabulary: In news broadcasts, there are certain words that are frequently used. In VOA Special English, for instance, about 1,500 words are often repeated in several broad categories:

*Politics: cold war, hot line, withdraw, presidential election, referendum, forum, summit, refugee, sanction, sustainable development, parliament, senate, congress, poll*

*Economy: finance, banking group, import, export, stock exchange, balanced trade, embargo, deficit trade*

*Science and technology: space shuttle, laser technology, robot, automation, acid rain, electronics, manufacturing, Internet*

*Military matters: space war, guided missile, nuclear facilities, siege, cease-fire, limited war, logistic supply, coup*

ii) Proper names:

News, the latest information about world-wide events, involves people and places everywhere in the globe. The following names should be familiar to students: U. S. President Bill Clinton, President of France Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister of Great Britain Tony Blair, President of the Republic of Russia Boris Yeltsin, and places like Geneva, Lebanon, Iraq, Bosnia, the Mediterranean, and Washington, D.C.

iii) Acronyms:

Organizational names frequently appear in news broadcasts, and most of these names are very long. In order to save time in the broadcast, acronyms are used. Acronyms are made from the first letters of the name of an organization, like UN, OPEC. There are two ways of pronouncing acronyms.

1. *Enunciate each letter, not the total title: UN, WHO, IMF, PLO, FBI, VOA, EEC, CIA.*
2. *Read as a word: NATO, UNESCO, OPEC, NAFTA, ANZUS*

The above major points will make it easier for students to understand news broadcasts.

## **Listening Tasks**

I utilize two tapes to give better understanding of VOA news. One tape that I record, is the “Special English news.” The other is of the same topics recorded from the “Standard English” news broadcast. Before students listen to the tapes, I give each student some handouts. On the handouts, there are some new words and expressions about the news they are going to hear. There are also some exercises for them to do after listening.

Sometimes some news items are difficult to understand, not because there are new words, but because the students do not have the requisite background knowledge. So before playing the news tape, I talk a little about the scenario to prepare them to understand the item better.

I play the “Special English” news first because it is at a slower speed and easier to understand. After hearing the news bulletin two times, the students are asked to do the exercises. The exercises can be used in a number of ways: spot dictation, true/false questions, writing out the

news leads, answering questions, guessing the meanings of some new words using context clues, etc. After the students understand a news item in special English, I play the same news in standard English. The students find it much easier to understand although it is broadcast at a normal speed. This time, they are told to try to listen and understand without thinking in Chinese.

I always replay the previous week's listening material once before working with new reports. This enables the students to recall and review what they have learned.

## **Homework**

In the listening lab, what my students learn is very limited because this is only a two-hour-a-week course. Therefore, I have to prepare them to study in their spare time. I record VOA news at both slower and normal speeds from my radio, and then ask the students to make copies of my tape in the college recording room. The students can listen to the material on their recorders at their own pace. They can use their dictionaries to look up words that they are hearing for the first time. The students have to finish listening to one tape in two weeks and then start another one. To persuade them to listen frequently, I give them small tests regularly and grade them each time to monitor their progress.

I also suggest that the students listen to Chinese news broadcasts and read Chinese newspapers. Big events are not only publicized in foreign languages, but also in the Chinese media. Getting information and background knowledge of the same events in Chinese helps them understand English broadcasts better. Reading English language newspapers and journals serves the same purpose. It also strengthens and expands their news vocabulary.

## **Conclusion**

This kind of preparatory work can be tiring and time-consuming for the teacher. To hear and record the VOA news, I have to get up early the (VOA morning news broadcast is clearer than the evening broadcast in my location). It is important for me, as the teacher, to listen to these tapes and understand the news broadcast myself before teaching it. So if I have difficulty in understanding, I go to the two foreign teachers at my college for help. I have to know the new words and expressions in each news item so that I can design and type exercises, which are handed out to students each week.

However, all my effort has paid off. Hard training and continued practice has enabled my students to deal with "Special English" news without difficulty. A few of them can understand "Standard English" news without problems. What is more important, they receive so much exposure to VOA programs that they have formed a good habit of tuning in to VOA broadcasts and using the listening skills I have taught them. As they are making progress in understanding, they become more motivated in learning the English language.

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